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ABSTRACT

This second volume of Compact Guides to Information on Urban and Minority Education includes three reports: a review of alternative schools, a report on teaching writing to dialectally different youths, and a bibliography on race and sex stereotyping in children's books. The first report discusses the characteristics, types and outcomes of alternative schools in a question and answer format. The nature of writing errors by nonstandard English speakers, problems of translation into standard English, and strategies for improvement of writing instruction are addressed in the second report. The bibliographic citations in the third report represent a wide range of topics on the problem of stereotyping as well as resources promoting balanced sex/race fairness in the treatment of images of minority groups and women. (JCD)

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VOLUME II

January, 1982

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Alternative Schools— Some Answers and Questions

What are the characteristics of an alternative school?

An alternative school has been defined as "any school that provides alternative learning experiences to those provided by conventional schools within its community and that is available by choice to every family within its community at no extra cost" (Smith).

The alternative school movement began in the late 1960s, at a time when popular ideals emphasized egalitarianism and participatory decision-making, and when there was a great push to increase the participation of minorities in all phases of public life. Critical of the society and government, as well as of education, the teachers, principals and community members who developed the first alternative schools asked a number of penetrating questions:

- What is learning, and how can it be evaluated?
- How can parents and the community be used to further education?
- To what extent can freedom and responsibility be given to children?
- How can a child's ethnic and cultural background be part of learning?
- What is the importance of traditional teacher training, educational facilities and learning materials? (Krohl)

As alternative schools have grown across the country, they have fallen into a number of broad types, including: open schools, minischools, schools without walls, learning centers, continuation schools, multicultural schools, free schools, schools within schools, magnet schools, and community schools. They have experimented with such varying learning models as Summerhill education, open education, individualized instruction, fundamental "back-to-basics" education, experiential learning, and behavior modification (Carnegie Council; Barr).

Despite their great variety, and despite the difference in degree to which any one school may have a single attribute, these alternative schools share a number of qualities:

- voluntarism
- small size
- egalitarianism
- humaneness
- participatory decision-making
- organizational flexibility
- individualized learning
- school-community commitment
- more comprehensive goals than conventional schools (Krahl).

What kinds of schools, staff, and students have been attracted to alternative schools?

A nationwide survey in 1977 showed that 28 percent of all school districts had alternative schools (Barr, Colston & Parret). Most alternative schools have been created in the context of large schools in large and medium sized cities, where depersonalization and rigidity have alienated some staff members and a significant segment of the student population (Liebrader). By 1981, 80 percent of the nation's larger school districts (those enrolling 25,000 or more students) had alternative schools. Yet one out of every five districts enrolling less than 600 students also had one or more (Raywid, 1981).

Alternative schools began as havens for students disaffected with schooling. In recent years, magnet schools, in particular, have been used to promote desegregation and to stop white flight from urban areas. Although alternative schools attract academically competent, white middle-class students, increasingly they have also been directed specifically toward those students who have attendance or discipline problems, who are potential or actual dropouts, or who have severe difficulty in mastering the basic skills. One study of 19 alternative schools noted that, of seven for which racial data were available, six were at least 40 percent black, and a third of the total schools were established for actual or potential dropouts. Many alternative schools combine academic learning with vocational and career education. While an alternative school must be voluntary, the variety of foci and admissions policies means that the actual degree of students' choice in attending varies from almost total to barely any (Beard; Broad; Connett; Duke & Muzio; Liebrader; Perry).

What do evaluations indicate about the success of alternative schools?

In comparison with conventional schools, alternative schools have not produced a great body of systematic evaluation. Just as no two alternative schools are alike, no two evaluations have been identical. However, scattered evidence from evaluations of alternative schools indicates:

- Students tend to stay in school, and the dropout rate declines.

- Truancy and violence diminish, and school and classroom attendance increase.
- Student attitudes toward themselves and their programs improve, and the students gain a heightened sense of control over their own lives.
- Students make significant gains in basic skills, such as math and reading; gain higher grade point averages; and score better on scholastic aptitude tests.
- Students learn vocational skills, and may even gain direct experience in the working world.
- At least some alternative schools send a higher percentage of their graduates on to college than do comparable schools in the same district.

(D.C. Public Schools; Broad; Liebrader; Duke & Muzio; Raywid, 1981.)

Can aspects of alternative schools be isolated as particularly useful to students?

Student needs vary. One of the strengths of the alternative schools has been the creation of environments in which different students' needs can be met. In an alternative school for students with records of social disruption, the staff found that reducing strong, controlling figures and situations ameliorated social behavior. In an alternative school directed to students with little skill mastery, the administration isolated individualized instruction with a "no fail" philosophy and a focus on students' self-esteem and motivation as factors conducive to their success (D.C. Public Schools.) In fact, it has been argued that those alternative schools fare better that direct themselves to the needs of specific populations than do those designed simply to be alternative schools (Krahl).

Those aspects of alternative schools that can be isolated as generally useful to student progress have been:

- small size—brings about pride of ownership and experimentation
- flexibility—allows for matching student learning styles with instruction
- strong leadership—generates needed morale and energy, whether this leadership is exerted by a principal or the teachers
- student participation in decision-making—results in an atmosphere of respect, trust and caring
- learning designed to create student success and to enhance student self-concept—promotes lowered truancy and vandalism levels.

What may be some unintended consequences of alternative schools?

Alternative schools follow the traditional pattern in public education of isolating a problem or separating out a group of similar individuals. Thus a type of defacto segregation may be created among faculty (for ideological reasons) or students (by problem area).

Alternative schools also have a tendency to evolve toward more conventional teaching methods and structures. Observers have noted that the difference between the alternative school and its conventional counterpart may decrease with time.

Although school staff are committed to the goals of alternative schools and in general are very satisfied with their work, they frequently "burn out" from the high demands of these schools. This may be one of the reasons why alternative schools evolve toward more conventional (less demanding) content and form.

Are alternative schools a strategy for change?

The evidence is contradictory. Emerging from these settings are new curricula, new humanistic methods of teaching, and new organizational styles. But it is not clear whether these changes can be incorporated into the conventional school. Until now, the communication and administrative link between the alternative school and the larger school systems have been weak. Moreover, it has been noted that these alternative schools can bleed the resources of a school district. Clearly, it is simply easier to start a new school than to change an existing one (Barr; Lieberman & Griffin).

—Carol Ascher, Ph.D.

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Writing Instruction for Dialectally Different Youths

In the late 1960s writers like John Holt, Herbert Kohl, and Jonathan Kozol created moving, impressionistic accounts of their time spent in inner-city elementary schools where they taught creative writing to students who often spoke nonstandard English. This same period saw a beginning interest in teaching standard English—with an emphasis on speaking and reading—to inner city students (Fasold and Shuy 1970). On the other hand, elementary and secondary curriculum over the past decade has tended to minimize the importance of writing skills for all pupils. Nor has there been much systematic research on the teaching of writing to public school students, including inner city children who speak a vernacular. Although a renewed public concern for writing has resulted in the College Board's restoration of a short essay to its examination, it is not until the college level, if at all, that the remediation of writing problems is firmly addressed. Almost all of the research on teaching writing to speakers of nonstandard English focuses on this postsecondary group.

Little writing in general is taught in the public schools.

The idea that inner-city students have been given an opportunity to learn writing needs to be corrected. A 1980 national survey of writing in the 9th and 11th grades showed that there is little writing of any kind practiced in secondary schools, and the writing which does occur consists of note taking and short-answer responses. Writing of at least a paragraph was reported as a "frequent activity" for tests, homework, or classwork in 29 percent of the 9th grade classes and 36 percent of the 11th grade classes. Moreover, of the writing samples supplied by the surveyed teachers, 85 percent reflected strictly informational uses, such as filling out forms, copying down notes and answering questions on short-answer tests (Applebee 1980).

The national survey did not analyze its data by the location of the school, or the race or social class of the students. But Shaughnessy (1977) states that, while middle-class high school students are likely to write 350 words a week, inner-city students who appear in college "basic writing" courses have generally written a mere 350 words a semester, and it is not unusual if they have written far less than that.

Translating nonstandard English into acceptable writing demands rethinking the source of errors.

The writing problems of inner-city students have commonly been attributed to their having "no grammar" or syntax, to their suffering from a limited lexicon, and to their being incapable of reflecting abstract thought. In fact, as Labov (1972) and others have shown, Black English vernacular is grounded in its own grammatical rules and logic, Black students are highly verbal in speech (this is a much prized area of Black culture), and the students as well as their vernacular are quite capable of abstract thought. However, since this and other dialects are clearly stigmatized in white middle-class and business institutions, the short-lived fashion of promoting vernacular in the classroom has all but disappeared (Torrey 1977; Terrebonne, 1977).

Between 1968 and 1980, a number of researchers tried to discover the connection between spoken dialect and errors in standard-English writing. The results were far from uniform. While some studies indicated a higher incidence of certain nonstandard syntactical markers in the writing of vernacular speakers than in their speech (eg. Berger 1968), others indicated either a parallel between the grammars of speech and writing, or recognizable patterns—including hypercorrection—produced by alterations from speech to writing (eg. Terrebonne & Terrebonne 1976). Several studies also showed relatively little relation between the spoken and written grammar (eg. Heard & Stokes 1975). As for whether the writing of Black or other dialect-speaking students can be identified solely on the basis of nonstandard English markers, research indicates that grammar alone may not be sufficient to convey the ethnicity of the writer (Ney 1977; Noonan-Wagner 1980).

The writing difficulties of speakers of nonstandard English have also been traced to a variety of interferences other than vernacular grammar. Spelling errors in standard English by speakers of Black English vernacular may stem from interference from the latter (Cronnell 1979). The influence of a strong religious tradition has been shown in compositions through such tendencies as moralizing, sermonizing, and the use of proverbs, maxims, aphorisms, and cliches (Noonan-Wagner 1980). A humiliating encounter with school language, the pleasures of peer and neighborhood talk, and hours of listening to the language of television, the radio, and the movies have also been pinpointed as creating alternative pressures and codes in the minds of speakers of nonstandard English (Shaughnessy 1977).

The writing errors of nonstandard English speakers occur in patterned ways at various levels.

Another way of conceptualizing the errors made by speakers of nonstandard English is by type of errors within a composition. Whether or not researchers agree on the nature of the patterns involved, most concur that there is a consistency in the errors. Shaughnessy (1977) has written a comprehensive and humanistic analysis of the various

kinds of mistakes made by students in college "basic writing" classes. Her work includes all the items listed below. Other authors offering analyses are placed by their area of contribution:

- Handwriting and punctuation (Shaughnessy 1977)
- Grammar (Reed 1973; Fowler 1979; Terrebonne and Terrebonne 1976; Wolfram and Whiteman 1971).
- Spelling (Cronnell 1979)
- Vocabulary (Shaughnessy 1977)
- Syntax (Noonan-Wagner 1980)
- Composition process (Fowler 1979).

Shaughnessy's analysis points out the connectedness of the "basic writer's" difficulties in one area with those in another.

There are ways to teach correctly-spelled, grammatical, and logically developed writing to youths and young adults who speak nonstandard English.

Techniques developed to teach writing generally involve working with students on diagnoses and other details too fine to be reproduced here. However, some useful themes and issues may be mentioned.

- Reading enough "good English" will not effortlessly lead vernacular speakers to writing acceptable standard English (Wolfram and Whiteman 1971).
- A central question is one of expectations: How many errors can a teacher expect a student to eliminate in a given paragraph over a semester or a year (Shaughnessy 1977)?
- For didactic as well as humanitarian purposes, it is important that students speaking a vernacular appreciate it as a unique and valid linguistic system, evolved through its own historical process, and offering comparison with other similar linguistic systems (Reed 1973).
- The rules of a vernacular can be used to help students understand the places where cross-dialectal interferences create systematic errors, and to help them translate dialect into the appropriate standard English equivalents (Cronnell 1979; Reed 1973; Terrebonne & Terrebonne 1976; Wolfram & Whiteman 1971).
- Students' culture must be seen as positive and functional, and students' experiences should be used to develop relevant topics for compositions (Darnell 1974).

—Carol Ascher, Ph.D.

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ERIC/CUE Brief Bibliography Number 6

January 1982

Stereotyping in Children's Books and School Curriculums: Strategies for Change

This bibliography was created for administrators, teachers, parents, and other interested laypersons who wish to combat race and sex stereotyping in children's textbooks and literature. Citations cover a wide range of topics which include current studies delineating the extent and nature of the problem as well as resources promoting balanced and sex/race fair images of women and minority groups.

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